

# Waterloo 'Re-enacted', 1990

ALAN LARSEN

In June 1990 more than 2,000 re-enactors gathered on the field of Waterloo to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the battle. The author was present as 'commander of the French cavalry'.

June 1990's 'reconstruction' of the Battle of Waterloo was, by any standards, unique: a curious mixture of nationalities and attitudes, of serious commemoration and overblown town festival, witnessed by massive crowds and documented by Europe's press. Regiments of uncompromisingly authentic 'living historians' rubbed shoulders with bizarre marching societies whose connection with the soldiery of the Napoleonic era could only be described as tenuous. French and Belgians, Americans and Russians, Germans, Czechs and Englishmen – in all 26 different nationalities totalling 2,300 enthusiasts lived and marched together for three days in an impossibly harmonious fashion, culminating in a three-hour finale on the original field.

Something like 150,000 spectators (published estimates varied between 20,000 and 200,000) turned up to view the event. What did they get for their money? It depended very much, one suspects, on their expectations. An informed military historian anticipating an exacting reconstruction of Europe's greatest battle was definitely in the wrong place – perhaps his or her money may have been better spent on a video copy of Sergei Bondarchuk's excellent film of the same name. Yet the many Belgian families who turned up expecting, no doubt, a pleasant day's outing with lots of colour and noise, would not have been disappointed. It was, in many respects, a fun day in the sun for everybody, audience and armies alike.

Underlining this was a lack

of any real sense of the less appealing aspects of the original event. By dusk on 18 June 1815 47,000 men were left dead or wounded, often horribly mutilated. The 'casualties' seen in the re-enactment, however, were generally of the languid, temporary, propped-elbow variety characteristic of so many re-enactment events. Understandable, perhaps, given the investment of time and money required on the part of participants to actually get there; but ludicrous nonetheless. At the other extreme, occasional 'bloody death scenes' of a truly histrionic and frankly astonishing nature were witnessed. All of this rather begs the question of whether the memory of the men who fought and died at Waterloo is being done justice. Is it perhaps distasteful – the conclusion many American re-enactors have reached – to enact these sometimes totally unconvincing spectacles on the same ground which saw so much suffering and genuine heroism?

Regardless of whether they drank champagne in the cool of the VIP tent, or stood in the heat at the packed barriers, such weighty philosophical considerations were unlikely to have loomed large in the minds of the audience. Those with a smattering of historical knowledge may have been somewhat confused by the surprising presence on the field of Austrian and Russian troops. Yet the vast majority of the crowd, one suspects, were no more put out by this than they were by the total absence of British cavalry, or the odd missing farmhouse....

The Great Belgian Public must, nonetheless, have been

surprised at the (literally) low profile of the Emperor of the French. It was, it must be said, difficult to spot the great man. Even the recreated Armée du Nord had to look hard to find the somewhat uninspiring figure of the retired Belgian schoolteacher representing Napoleon Bonaparte. Unencumbered by any physical resemblance to the Terror of Europe, lacking a 'Marengo' or even a carriage, Monsieur Scoubla's progress through the ranks of his adoring army was, at times, a confusing affair. For all that, it did represent a vast improvement on the farcical situation encountered in 1988, when three or four rival Napoleons (accounts vary) turned up, each vying for attention.

It is, as the reader will have gathered by now, all too easy to write a risible account of the event. After all, this approach was almost universal among the large British press contingent, references to 'pantomime soldiers' and the on-site hamburger stalls abounding. At least one television crew, not finding

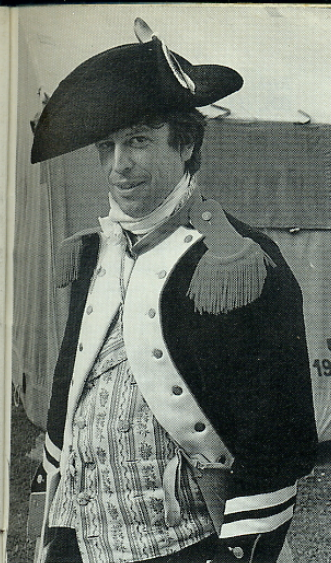
the participants quite ludicrous enough, resorted to painfully contrived 'set-ups'.

What the media, almost without exception, failed to pick up on were the remarkable events of the night of Saturday 16 June. In a large sports hall in the suburbs of Waterloo occurred what must have been the greatest international coming together in the history of the hobby of military re-enactment. For those hundreds of dedicated enthusiasts who had travelled thousands of miles to be there, this really was their night. Displaying a cheerful irreverence for the posturings and speech-making of local politicians, and indeed of their own appointed leaders, some of the world's keenest re-enactment buffs got on with the serious business of cementing the benefits of the new Europe.

*Captain-Lieutenant David Banks,  
Grenadier Company, First Foot  
Guards.*







Contingents from Latvia, Philadelphia, and a hundred places between drank, sang and compared notes late into the night. It was, in short, an extraordinary and inspiring event which emphasised the promising future of Napoleonic re-enactment in Europe. Given continuing political stability, a quarter century of bicentennial events of ever increasing quality are in prospect, culminating, no doubt, in the 200th anniversary re-creation of Napoleon's final defeat. In that respect re-enactments at Waterloo will have been both a beginning, and an end.

The following survey represents the first systematic attempt to provide even the most basic of information on the dozens of groups at Waterloo. Communication and co-ordination in European-wide Napoleonic re-enactment is still in its infancy, making a definitive survey extremely difficult. Consequently there are a number of omissions and, no doubt, the occasional inaccuracy for which apologies are made in advance. Corrections or comments are of course welcome, and can be forwarded to the author via 'MI'. No assessment is made of the authenticity or otherwise of each unit's 'impression'. Thanks are due to Phillip Coates-Wright, Secretary of the UK's Napoleonic Association, and to David Chandler, President of the Union of European Uniformed Citizen and Rifle Corps. Between them Phillip and David provided me with a



wealth of information - any mistakes are my responsibility alone.

#### **The Anglo-Belgian Army**

- *The First Foot Guards (Light Company, Third Battalion)*

A unit of the Napoleonic Association, fielding nearly 20 men on the day.

- *Braunschweigisches Feld Corps*

A truly international unit based in Frankfurt, Germany, its membership comprises a mixture of American service men, German nationals, the odd Englishman, and two New Zealanders, both of whom were at Waterloo.

- *The Seventh Bon Belge*

This group alone represented the significant Dutch-Belgian contingent within Wellington's army, and were unique in that they are Belgians portraying Belgians, the vast majority of their countrymen preferring to turn out as Frenchmen. At the event their numbers were bolstered by a dozen or so Americans, wearing suitably modified War of 1812 uniforms.

The next formation in the British line of battle was composed of four individual regiments - the 7th Fusiliers, 9th Norfolk, 42nd Royal Highland, and 45th Nottinghamshire. All are wholly English units, with the exception of the Black Watch which had its origins in a German pipe band - in recent years American servicemen and an increasing number of Englishmen have filled its ranks.

- *The Canadian Redcoats*

In the absence of these heroes the Allied forces would have been even more outnumbered than they actually were - farcically so, in fact. Nearly a hundred of the colonial Britons crossed the Atlantic, representing the 49th Leicestershire Regt., the Incorporated Militia of Upper Canada, and the 33rd West Yorkshire Regt. - later, of course, the Duke of Wellington's.

- *Bentheim and Lauenberg Landwehr*

These contingents from Hanover wear the uniforms of Hanoverian militia of the period.



#### **Left:**

An NCO of the *Volontaires Nationaux* - a good example of a 'pan-European' re-enactment unit containing members from England, France and Germany.

#### **Centre:**

Glenn Robinson from Medway, Kent, in the persona of a sergeant of the 42nd (Royal Highland) Regiment of the Napoleonic Association, chatting before battle with the colour sergeant of the *Light Company, First Foot Guards*.

#### **Right:**

Sgt. Ron Bingham of the *Brunswick Field Corps*, an American soldier serving with a mixed American-German re-enactment unit based in Frankfurt. On the left, Wesley Gollidge - one of the author's two fellow New Zealanders serving in the ranks of the *Black Brunswickers* at Waterloo.

- *Villingen Grenadier Corps*

The *Burgerwehr* of the southern German town of Villingen wear a uniform of 1809 vintage. Not a re-enactment unit as such, they are a continuation of an original town militia. A cannon deployed at the Waterloo re-enactment was actually used to disperse Liberal demonstrations in 1848.

- *The 68th (Durham) Light Infantry*

The Durhams, an English county-based unit, were the largest single redcoat unit on the field.

- *The Royal Artillery Band*

Actually a British period military music society, in one of its many guises. They provided stirring martial tunes played on appropriate instruments, including the remarkable 'serpent'.

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A



B

**Above & right:**

(A) Marching off the field, part of the large and good-looking contingent of Canadian redcoats - the Incorporated Militia of Upper Canada.

(B) The largest British unit actually to be raised in Britain is the 68th (Durham) Light Infantry, Captain Keith Bartlett commanding. Their standard of costume authenticity, drill and discipline was extremely impressive.

(C) As in 1815, the 95th Rifles provided a skirmish line for the British infantry.



C

**Right:**  
(D), (E) The Waterloo re-enactment gave the redcoats a rare opportunity to get together in sufficient numbers to form a square. Here, preparing to receive cavalry, and firing a volley, are the 33rd (West Yorkshire) Regiment from Canada; the face at the left was composed of the 68th Durhams. Men who served in this square reported that once a few volleys had provided enough powder smoke to blank out the crowd and the Lion Mound, and the thunder of hooves could be heard approaching, the adrenalin began to flow very satisfactorily.



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Along with the Royal Horse Artillery and Royal Artillery gun crews, the Royal Artificers and individual Engineer Officers, they form the Napoleonic Association's Royal Board of Ordnance.

*- The 95th Rifles*

Another NA unit, and a well-established one at that, having been in existence for at least a decade. As in 1815 they provided a screen of skirmishers for the Allied line.

*- KGL Light Infantry*

Garrisoning the reconstruction farmhouse of La Haye Sainte were more green-clad riflemen. The King's German Legion Light Infantry hail from Hanover, as did the original KGL.

*- Hessischen Korps*

Another German light infantry unit defended the (predemolished) ruins of Hougoumont. The Hessischen Jaegers are based in Bermel, with members from both Frankfurt and Aachen.

**The Prussian Army**

*- The West Prussian Infantry Regiment*

The most obviously Prussian of the units in Blucher's force. The 20 members of this unit are drawn from the entire Berlin area - a visible manifestation of a re-united Germany.

*- Westphalian Landwehr*

From 1813 onwards the contribution of the Landwehr battalions was crucial to the Prussian war effort. David Schiller's regiment contributed 30 men at Waterloo - a mixture, again, of native Germans and Americans resident in Germany.

*- 31st Prussian Infantry*

There were almost certainly no US citizens in the unit on the Landwehr's right. Ukrainians and Russians, dressed in Napoleonic Russian uniforms, represented the 31st Prussian Infantry who during the War of Liberation were supplied with surplus Russian clothing.

*- The Austrian Brigade*

At this Waterloo Austrian troops were in evidence. Infantry Regt. No. 1 (Konig) is a large unit - of Czechs.... Unlike other Eastern European enthusiasts, the two companies from Ostravia and Brno have

been able to benefit from relatively liberal gun laws to produce working muskets and full size cannon - a battery of four of these was manned by brown-clad gunners from Moravia. The remaining component of the Austrian force was provided by the dozen Englishmen of Ian Castle's Hoch und Deutschmeister. In total, probably a hundred 'Kaiserliks' were present on the field.

**Armée Du Nord**

This consisted, for the most part, of Belgian marching societies. Many of these groups represented Old Guard style units, exceptions being the 'Voltigeurs d'Elite' from Chatelet, the Fusiliers Marins from Jumet, and the 112eme Ligne from Gosselies; the latter comprises beplumed Grenadiers and Voltigeurs.

*- The 21eme Ligne*

This coachload of Britons provided the largest contingent present of actual line infantry - the backbone of Napoleon's armies.

*- The 18eme Ligne and Division*

Until six or seven years ago there was very little, if any, 'reconstitution' of Napoleonic French soldiery by the French themselves. Since then a relatively small number of enthusiasts have begun re-enacting the period, though activity is still largely confined to Northern France. The largest of these groups is Regis Sourmont's 18eme Ligne from the Lille area. Supplementing their number at Waterloo were members of the German 18th Infanterie de Ligne formed, quite independently, in the DDR four years ago. Other truly French units present included the 27eme Ligne from Dijon and two smaller Parisian units.

*- Fusiliers-Grenadiers de la Garde*

French soldiery came to Waterloo from throughout Europe - literally, in fact, from Lancashire to Latvia. A daunting three-day train journey from Riga brought a party of Fusiliers-Grenadiers and Infanterie Polonais to the event. Predictably restrictive gun laws and a desperate shortage of foreign currency are just two of the obstacles overcome by the -



**Left:**

This portrait does justice to the high standards of the 90-odd Canadian re-enactors who crossed the Atlantic to participate. An officer displays the 'Valiant Stonner' sleeve badge awarded in the Peninsula to the survivors of 'Forlorn Hope' storming parties.

**below:**

Tim Pickles, an Englishman now based in New Orleans, played the Duke of Wellington on the day.

Latvians and Lithuanians making up these two units.

*- The 32eme de Ligne*

A unit of 'French' infantry based in Moscow and commanded by a serving Soviet Army captain.







Richard Moore, from Sheffield, commanded the NA's 95th Rifles. Note the reconstruction of the 'Winchester jacket' - the surviving dolman of Captain Walter Clarke, c.1807-1810, now in the collection of the Royal Green Jackets Museum. Richard has been known to brandish a 1796 Heavy Cavalry sabre, prompting comparison with a certain character in modern historical fiction...



#### 9eme Légère (Chasseurs des Cévennes)

The 'Neuvieme' are clad in light infantry uniform of the 1790s. This includes queues and, in many cases, 'boucles d'oreille'. A British unit of the Napoleonic Association.

#### - The 3eme and the 46eme

These NA units - both early war 'impressions' - formed the skirmish line of the French Army. Apty named Kevin Garlick commands the 'Troisieme', distinctive in their boiled leather Tarletons.

#### - The Vieux Grenadiers

Switzerland's contribution to the 175th anniversary event. From Geneva, the regiment featured a very big band and some very big Sapeurs.... The band, in conjunction with Waterloo's Musique de la Garde, added immensely to the very festive nature of the pre-battle get-together.

#### - Grenadiers à Cheval de la Garde

Fielding at least 30 horse-men, Michel Phillippe's regiment formed the front rank of the French cavalry charges.

#### - Chasseurs à Cheval de la Garde

The Chasseurs, a small unit from the Lille area, provided a

mounted escort for the Emperor.

#### - Hussars

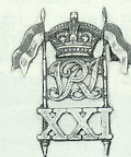
Two units of Hussars formed the second and third lines of the French cavalry formation. Both groups are made up of Belgian personnel.

#### - Uhlans

The arrival at Waterloo of this troop was the culmination of a remarkable journey. In order to participate, 12 members of the Uhlan Club of Moscow had set out some days previously and driven - with horseboxes - the 1,785 miles from Moscow. Given the difficulties, at the best of times, of transcontinental driving, their determination was admirable. Bearing in mind the added problems of equine-related documentation, and consequent multi-border bureaucracy, their achievement was nothing short of astonishing.



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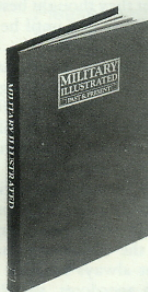
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